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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 000186

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR NEA/FO, NEA/ELA

ALSO FOR IO/PDAS WARLICK

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NSC FOR MCDERMOTT, SHAPIRO

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TAGS: PREL PGOV UNSC LE SY

SUBJECT: LEBANON: HARIRI ON MARCH 14 ELECTION PREPARATIONS,
STL

REF: BEIRUT 140

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4
(b) and (d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) Future Movement leader MP Saad Hariri -- receiving the Ambassador on February 13, the eve of the fourth anniversary of the assassination of his father, former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri -- claimed that the March 8 opposition was working to discredit investigative information on his father's death that had been collected through wiretaps. Hariri said he would accept all decisions of the Special Tribunal for Lebanon, scheduled to start work March 1.

¶2. (C) Delving into March 14 electoral maneuvering, Hariri said his efforts to form an alliance in Tripoli with former Prime Minister Najib Mikati and Minister of Economy and Trade Mohammed Safadi were going well. Hariri reported he would meet with the Armenian Tashnaq party soon. He stressed that parliamentary elections must be held as scheduled on June 7 and requested the U.S. and its allies publicly demand this. Hariri expressed concern that if neither March 14 nor March 8 won a clear majority in elections, President Michel Sleiman would face intense pressure from March 8 allies, Syria and Iran. End summary.

WIRETAPPING AND
FORMER PM HARIRI'S ASSASSINATION

¶3. (C) Future Movement leader MP Saad Hariri told the Ambassador, accompanied by PolEconOff, that the recent wiretapping controversy (reftel) was an attempt by the March 8 opposition to discredit information, allegedly collected through wiretapping, related to the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri. Hariri insisted that Internal Security Forces (ISF) Head of Intelligence Colonel Wissam Hassan had acted legally when collecting information related to the assassination. Hassan had a court order -- requested by the General Prosecutor and approved by the cabinet -- to collect information through wiretapping. UNIIC had also requested the data, Hariri said.

¶4. (C) Hariri accused Telecommunications Minister Gebran Bassil, a member of the opposition, of passing operational

authority over wiretapping operations to the LAF G-2 (military intelligence) and expressed distrust of LAF G-2 Deputy Colonel Abbas Ibrahim. Hariri said it was "obvious" now why the opposition had requested control of the telecom ministry during last summer's cabinet formation.

¶15. (C) Hariri told the Ambassador that, in order to empower the Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL), he would accept all demands and conclusions of the court. If the STL released the four generals detained in connection with the assassination -- after the GOL cedes the dossier to the STL -- he would accept this, Hariri said. He has said publicly, "we paid blood but we will not stand in its (the STL's) face." If the STL finds Syria not guilty of his father's assassination, Hariri declared he would publicly apologize. Hariri advisor and cousin Nader Hariri emphasized that the GOL would not release the generals before the March 1 STL start-date, but would wait instead for the STL to request the transfer of dossiers.

NO NATIONAL UNITY GOVERNMENT; SYRIA

¶16. (C) Hariri stressed that March 14 must win a clear majority in the 2009 parliamentary elections. If neither March 8 nor March 14 wins the majority, President Sleiman will become a target of pressure tactics, he argued. March 8 has more tools to pressure the President than March 14, he added. Hariri assessed that "Sleiman's heart is with us," but assessed the political pressure would be difficult for the President. Hariri urged the U.S. to keep supporting

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Sleiman and to ensure a strong message against Syrian and Iranian interference in Lebanese sovereignty.

¶17. (C) Confirming his opposition to a post-election national unity government, Hariri said he would not be held accountable for actions taken by "the other side." Assuming March 14 victory in the elections, Hariri said March 8 would be welcome in the new government, but would not receive a blocking third of cabinet portfolios. (Note: In a February 16 speech to commemorate the anniversary of the killing of Hizballah figure Imad Mugniyah, Hizballah SYG Hassan Nasrallah offered March 14 a veto share in a future March 8 majority government. End note.)

¶18. (C) On potential U.S.-Syria engagement, Hariri said he did not oppose engagement as long as the interests of Lebanon were protected. However, he opined that the U.S. would learn quickly for itself that the Syrians were "a bunch of liars." Hariri also expressed concern regarding LAF Commander Jean Kahwagi who, according to Hariri, was "too weak regarding Hizballah." He asked the USG to "put (Kahwagi) on the spot" during the general's upcoming visit to the United States.

ELECTION PREP ONGOING

¶19. (C) The Ambassador asked Hariri about the state of play with regard to parliamentary election alliances, beginning by asking about Jemaah Islamiya (JI), which had recently announced six candidate names and a possible alliance with Hariri's Future movement. Discussing March 14 electoral machinations, Hariri said he would take one or two JI candidates on his lists. He described JI as a moderate Sunni religious party that would enable Future to "cut off" the Salafists. He mentioned JI candidate Imad al-Hut -- very moderate and from an old Beirut family, according to Hariri -- as a likely possibility in the Beirut 3 district. Hariri said he "was still looking" for a second JI spot. Efforts to build an alliance among Sunnis in Tripoli with former Prime Minister Najib Mikati and Minister of Economy and Trade Mohammed Safadi were going well, Hariri said. However, according to Hariri, Syria is pushing Mikati away from an alliance with him. Although Mikati is not "pro-Syrian,"

Hariri said, Syria can still pressure him. He argued that avoiding a Mikati-Safadi alliance in Tripoli -- that did not include Hariri -- was crucial.

¶10. (C) Discussion turned to the possible Beirut candidacy of Ibrahim Shamseddine, the independent Shia Minister of Administrative Reform. Hariri did not respond positively, noting that Doha participants had agreed to split the four seats evenly in Beirut 2 between March 8 and March 14, and the Shia seat was given to the March 8 opposition, which includes Hizballah. Shamseddine could run as an independent in Beirut 2, but this would put him in direct competition with Hizballah. In Beirut 3, Hariri has a Shia seat he controls, but he indicated that he had picked Ghazi Youssef for this slot. (Note: It did not appear that Hariri had yet agreed to "make space" for independent Shia Shamseddine's candidacy. End note.)

¶11. (C) Hariri again expressed distrust of the Armenian Tashnaq party, but said that he planned to meet with the group the following week. Responding to a question from the Ambassador, Hariri said former deputy Prime Minister Issam Fares was not interested in running in elections, despite rumors to the contrary.

ON-TIME ELECTIONS A MUST

¶12. (C) Hariri stressed the need for elections to be held as scheduled on June 7. Hariri -- who said he was "not worried" about delays -- nonetheless urged the U.S. and its allies to push for on-time elections. Hariri had heard "whispers, here and there" that certain groups want to delay the elections. He noted that international insistence for on-time elections in 2005 was tremendously influential. Hariri expressed concern about Interior Minister Baroud's delays in accepting

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international election observers and said he planned to talk to President Sleiman about the issue. Hariri accused Baroud of "trying to play with everyone" and his behavior could have negative repercussions. (Note: We raised this issue with Baroud later February 13 and learned that the international observer decree should come before the Cabinet before March 17. End note.)

COMMENT

¶13. (C) The following day's March 14 gathering commemorating former PM Hariri's assassination attracted a huge crowd to downtown Beirut. As much a political rally for March 14 as a commemoration for Rafiq Hariri, the event included speeches by Saad and his March 14 partners Samir Geagea, Walid Jumblatt, Amine Gemayel and others. Hariri advisors called us after the February 14 demonstration to relay March 14's great satisfaction with the day's success. Nader Hariri and Ghattas Khoury said the high participation and positive atmosphere showed that "people are behind us." However, there were several incidents of violence involving March 14 supporters as they passed through opposition areas on the way to and from the rally. One supporter of Jumblatt's Progressive Socialist Party was killed, reportedly after being attacked by opposition supporters in Beirut. Jumblatt called for calm, and opposition leaders were among those to condemn the killing. End comment.

SISON